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## THE ISLE OF THE BLEST;

Or, Madeira to American Eyes.

BY H. C. VICTOR.

T a distance one is disappointed in the first view of Madeira, where the most luxuriant vegetation was looked for, nothing is seen but apparent sterility. A nearer view, however, undeceives the visitor. The supposed bleak hillsides are cut into terraces, which are covered with luxuriant verdure; every available spot—and many that are not—is cultivated and made to bring forth its quota of delicious fruits, vegetables, etc. This terrace cultivation is, upon a near view, a fine feature in the many hued landscape of the "Wooded Isle," though it contributes very much to the illusion, at a distance, of the savage sterility of the island.

To paint in the mind a proper picture of Madeira, as seen from a point near its principal town of Funchal, we would have to imagine a huge pile made up of lofty mountains, cut up here and there by deep cavernous ravines, the mountain-tops in the clouds, the ravines terraced step on step of dark green until they are lost in the mist above,—the white mingling with the green, substance with the shadow, until lost in the vapory world above:—mountain-sides terraced off, wooded to their very summits, the dark gray of the rocks contrasting finely with the flowery foliage which springs from every possible foothold, and in the midst of which often is seen a beautiful villa, or neat cottage, peering from its lovely surroundings like some shy beauty, afraid, in its modesty and consciousness of loveliness, of being seen.

A nearer view of the island—mean such a one as may be had from the island itself—would reveal numerous cascades and waterfalls, sparkling, flashing, and trembling in the pleasant sunshine, leaping from rock to rock on their way down to the sea. During and after the rainy season many of these may be seen afar out at sea; which, whether seen from sea or shore, form one of the finest pictures in the romantic scenery of the island. The waterfall is detected sometimes afar off, girding some gray, huge rock, and then lying beside it as though holding converse with the hoary-headed, taci-

turn sage; then its brightness is hid from view by a clump of foliage; again it goes bounding over some huge precipice, giving utterance to an ever-varying song all the time,—now one of deep bass, grand as the mountains towering around, organ-like and sweet, a "deep song of joy;" again the strain changes, after some mad leap;—mayhap it hath hurt itself, for now it sings sadly, breathing forth deep tremulous music—bass still, but sad;—now the breeze wafts its notes loud and deep on the ear; anon it sounds away off, its gushes of melody are borne past you, winging their way to the mystic spirit-land of music, so low and sweet that it seems the faint echo of the voices of those whose song is "like unto the sound of the voice of many waters." Again its voice is borne to you loud, noisy, and laughing—sacriligious laughter, too, as it quits its mountain recesses and hastens on to its mother-sea. As you follow its windings aloft, peering into the recesses of the rocks to catch a glimpse of the ones which strike the notes of the harp so full of melody, you may see, peering out of some nook, a little cot, half hidden by the foliage of the orange, magnolia, banana, or a mass of flowering shrubs,—the spirit of peace seeming there to keep company with that of melody.

Madeira is, literally, a land of fruits and flowers—blessed with a genial clime (the temperature of which scarcely varies ten degrees the year round, averaging, at the sea, about 70°, and less at a higher elevation,) it produces, in the greatest perfection, most of the tropical, and many of the fruits, flowers, and vegetables of the temperate regions. Oranges, lemons, citrons, guavas, figs, pomegranates, pine-apples, melons, apples, pears, peaches, and many others, are produced in abundance; also almonds, chestnuts, Brazil-nuts, etc. Fine qualities of coffee are also raised. Of flowers there is an endless and ever-blooming variety;—geraniums grow wild on the mountain-sides; the air is laden with the fragrance of roses, of which there is a wilderness. The habitations of the people are buried in fruit and shade trees, or embowered in flowering shrubs. It is another attractive feature to Madeira landscapes—the lovely villas, and picturesque little cots, planted here and there over the mountain-sides and amongst the cliffs, sometimes away up to be reached only by inclined planes. Peering out from amid a

wilderness of sweets, you may see portions of columns, or a lattice, or a section of a white wall—the white contrasting beautifully with the evergreen foliage. I know of no place—and I have visited in my wanderings some lovely spots—where the recluse, who loved lovely solitude, could so effectually seclude him or herself from the busy haunts of life, amid scenes of true loveliness and repose, as at Madeira. I wonder it has not been made the home of poetic souls, ere this. If the hills of Greece could beget inspiration in the souls of its gifted sons, Madeira should doubly be the home of the Muses, for the hills of Greece in its palmiest days never shone with that spirit of beauty which now makes radiant the very mountain tops of the "Blest Isle." But alas! the spirit of poesy dwells not in the breasts of a people which could boast of a Camoens. If the spirit of Art loves to dwell where the beautiful in Nature predominates, then ought the creations of a Phidias to start from every rock in Madeira. But the inspiration of art dwells not with an effeminate people who can but boast of a glorious Fatherland. Madeira should be an isle of song; should have a music all its own; its hills should be resonant with melody sweeter than Italia ever improvised. Why should not its people catch the inspiration from the sighing winds, and sweet echoes of its waterfalls? Portugal's mongrel race have yet got to produce a Mozart or Beethoven. When the song of liberty is heard amidst the mountains of Estrella, then may its notes be caught up by the people of the "Blest Isle" and they, too, become inspired with the true spirit of song. I do not mean to say that there is no song in the land, for there is much of it; but none which is *their own*, such as their majestic mountains should echo. How grand the Switzers' Song of Liberty, compared to the soft love song and saintly madrigal of the degenerate Portuguese!

Madeira's hills are, or have been, vine-clad. The production of its famous wines has comparatively ceased for the past four or five years, owing to a disease of the vines, which has, year after year, destroyed its products, that have, heretofore, been the main support of its people, its great source of wealth, that which made the island so valuable to poor, impoverished Portugal. The produce of the vine failing suddenly, the inhabitants of this, one of the finest—if not the most so—

islands in the world, were reduced to famine. It was robbed of its chief glory; it no longer produced the luscious vintages as famous for delicacy and genial qualities, as the place that produced them was celebrated for beauty. It is my opinion that the hills will soon be vine-clad as of yore, and that is the hope and opinion of the people of Madeira, who are as tenacious and jealous of the wine-producing qualities of their island as a people can well be. Be it the case or not, we need not expect to see or hear of such absolute want of the necessities of life as the people of this prolific isle have been subjected to. The cultivation of the real necessities of life have replaced, for the present, that of the luxurious grape. There is enough and to spare, yet, of delicious wine on the island—I mean, to spare to actual visitors, and not for exportation, for the wealthy inhabitants, who own all of the wine on the island, know full well what a treasure they possess, and will rarely part with it. The welcomed visitor will not want for a taste of the pure juice of the grape,—very little like the wretched stuff labelled and sold as “Pure Madeira.” Except in rare cases, that article can only be had on the island, where, as I have said, it is only to be found in the cellars of the wealthy residents. It was the writer’s good fortune to fall into the hands of a rotund and excellent old gentleman (peace to his memory and that of his cellar!) who had an abundance of various kinds of excellent juices, in a capacious cellar, and in the fullness of his heart at having an opportunity of showing his hospitality to a stranger from a strange land, he would very frequently insist upon entering the sanctuary of his cellar and to—as he expressed it in broken English—“takes shist a little vines.” I was not so lost to self-respect as to refuse! besides, politeness, if not a love for the pure juice, prompted me *always* to accept the old man’s invitation! I mention this to show a great characteristic of the people of the better class—their hospitality. But I shall not speak of the people, only so far as to illustrate the place; when we are dealing with nature it is best to leave man out, *if possible*.

Strangers visiting the island usually make it a point to visit “the Church of Our Lady,” situated high up on the mountain on the declivity of which a portion of the city of Funchal is built. From a

walled terrace in front of this sacred edifice—sacred it is from the fact of its containing an image of the tutelary divinity of the island, “Our Lady of the Mount”—’tis said that the finest view in the world is to be had—a fact I readily believe, after having seen some of the chosen spots of the earth. Here all of the glories of a Madeira landscape burst upon the vision, and one is almost bewildered by what he sees.

Leaving the town of Funchal, mounted upon a fine horse—and there are plenty of them on the island—accompanied by a groom, I took my way over a narrow, paved road, winding along amidst a wilderness of trees, shrubbery, and sweet-scented flowers, catching at each turn of the road the most delightful views, passing on my way many sequestered mansions of a people that I could but believe were happy in their seclusion; their lines had fallen in pleasant places, for the mantle of Nature’s loveliness was spread over their homes like a garment of many colors. As I mounted higher and higher, I realized more and more of the deliciousness and purity of the air; I felt it was a luxury to live, to breathe. Pure and bracing, redolent with the perfume of orange, rose, and geranium, the atmosphere seemed at that time exhilarating even to intoxication. [This, by the way, is one of the great charms of Madeira life—*i. e.* the great purity of its air—a fact which causes it to be a great resort for invalids, especially consumptives. Many persons are now there, foreigners, who have been for many years on the island in the enjoyment of good health, who, were they to leave, would forthwith go to that bourne whence no traveler returns.]

A ride of an hour through such scenes as I have described, brought me to the church. I was forcibly reminded of the fact that, on this poor earth, it seems as if it were decreed that nothing should be perfect; God’s glorious works were marred by man, and by man’s folly; those scenes of grandeur and beauty were marred (to my mind) by witnessing disgusting scenes in which man played a part. \* \*

The terrace! I stood between two mountains, sections of which rose far above, on the right, as I faced the sea, the mountains being distant several miles. The rocks on the left were near at hand, reared up precipitously hundreds of feet above. Behind they gradually ascended until lost in the clouds. Separating me

from those perpendicular walls was a horrible chasm, or ravine, called “the Corral,” looking fearfully grand down in its profound depths. The walled rocks around were tufted here and there with green, the sides of the mountains were spotted with forests, with evergreen verdure, with gardens, out of which peered numberless cottages and villas. There was one away up in a nook, better fitted for the nesting of an eagle, one would think, but there it stood looking down smilingly into the depths below; one was away off, far down, also nestling close to some old fatherly gray rock. Around were great trees and little ones, fruit and flowers, the spirit of silence resting on all. The leaves of the trees rustled just a little, and no more. At my feet were the white walls of the city, far away below; while between, on the terraced mountain-sides, was the ever-blooming smiling wilderness through which I had passed in coming up. The sea lay afar off, shining, waving, and trembling, in the light of the sun, reflecting the shadow of his smiles as he looked on this fair picture. The spirit of Peace seemed to brood over all. No sound, save the melody of falling waters, gushing from the mountain-cliffs, threading the mountain-sides with silver lines, lit with sunshine, and flashing with gladness. Those cascades gave out a melody not unlike what John heard in Patmos. \* \* \* This was a picture of what I saw at Madeira. I can poorly describe it: fairer than any ideal landscape ever put on canvas by the spiritual Cole—it was the realization of my boyhood’s dreams of Arcadia.

Have I colored the picture too highly? Let us see. Since leaving Madeira, I have visited that abomination of desolation, Ascension; have stood on the heights of Table Mountain and looked away into far South Africa; trod the groves of the lovely Isle of France—immortalized by St. Pierre; have been to the cocoa groves and cinnamon gardens of Ceylon; walked amid the spice groves of Penang; rambled at Singapore; seen the jungles of Siam; revelled in the horrible smells of Hong-Kong, Canton within the walls, Shanghai, and a multitude of Chinese villages; trod the hills of mystic Japan; traveled in the Philippines; visited Java; seen many of the isles of the fabled East; looked into St. Helena. After *this*, I am prepared to say that Madeira is the fairest spot on God’s footstool.